

The English Leaflet

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A COURSE IN LITERATURE FOR JUNIOR HIGH SCHOOLS

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I

The planning of any course in literature may prove somewhat demoralizing upon the planner. He must ever and again check himself sharply lest he favor beyond all reason his own individual tastes or likings and show himself parsimonious with those works to which he is personally indifferent. The classicist will say of children of junior high school age, "Here we have children in a formative period; let us make the most of this heaven-sent opportunity to give them only the best of that which has endured through the centuries. Give them what they should have, what they should like. Never again will they be so completely ours to command."

To which hotly responds one modernist, "Yes, force nothing but the classics upon children and create distaste, rebellion, a hatred for not only those things *you* wish admired and loved, but for all literature as well. Rather give boys and girls the forceful writings of their own day; let them see life as it is—practical, hard, clipped of all sentiment and sham. If you wish them to see beauty, let them find it in the subway train at night, or in that old street cleaner, or in the noiseless might of a dynamo."

Now to find a middle road between these two extremes and among the poetry, the essays, the drama, the stories, short and long, of all time, is a delicate matter, a matter for thought, and deep pondering, and actual experience.

If this project is to compile a Junior High School Literature Course, which shall be ideal as well as practical, why not let our idealistic scheme embrace a reorganization of grading, remodeling it "nearer to the heart's desire?" This year all the pupils in our school took an "Intelligence Test," a sane, business-like affair. Suppose that grading our seventh and eighth year pupils on the results of that part of the test dealing with reading-for-meaning, with vocabulary, with ability to use acquired English, we divide each of these two grades into an upper and a lower half respectively—all this to be quite unknown to the children, of course.

The material presented to them will be similar in content; it will vary in quantity. We shall have pupils grouped according to their proved ability and interest. It is one of the difficult ages with the beginnings of self-consciousness, of adolescent inertia and laziness, of trends in the wrong direction.

For such reasons let the selections, for the first, at least, be of action, stories of struggles—with animals, with hardships, with evils, with one's own weaker self. Glorify any sort of tussle for "home and fatherland," for "God and the King," for peace of family or peace of soul. Let their reading show life as a thrilling adventure that calls them to take a joyous part. Old ballads, tales of chivalry, hero tales of both sexes, stories of high patriotism—these establish ideals of devotion, loyalty, and sacrifice.

I should have them read the myths of all nations—of Hercules, making the world a better, safer place to live in; of Ulysses in his contests with the natural and the supernatural; of the punishment of the Flying Dutchman for his sin of blasphemy. First, they are good stories; second, they weave a background of culture never to be quite lost; third, they are a stimulus to a much-desired alertness of body, mind, and soul.

To many children at this age beauty is non-existent. It is the time to teach *To a Fringed Gentian*, *The Daffodils*, *Robert of Lincoln*, *The Sandpiper*—poems in which sound and color, warmth of feeling and joy in living, will make verse to them a vivid, pleasure-giving text.

Here in the large is the year's work. Some classes may read nearly all the suggested books or selections; others will complete only a judicious choice from each line. Customarily *The Great Stone Face* is a seventh-grade story, but too often children flounder about hopelessly among the many unfamiliar words. Rather than arouse dislike, I should always place it on an eighth-grade list.

Continuing this same scheme of division into the eighth grade, the B group would have much the same type of reading as in the preceding year. We should now present hero stories with special emphasis on the personal battles with selfishness, cowardice, laziness, disloyalty, ignorance, poverty. How Roosevelt overcame his physical weakness; how Booker T. Washington got an education; *The Man Without a Country*—these are "fighting" stories to bring out a well-directed fighting impulse.

Just at this point the Lyman and Hill's *Literature and Living*, Book II, offers a cunningly planned series of Conquests with the following sub-titles: CONTESTS WITH NATURE, TAMING PLANTS, DOMESTICATING ANIMALS, USING NATURE'S GIFTS, and CONQUESTS OF THE FUTURE. From stories of steam, electricity and chemistry, the next move would quite naturally be toward the fascination of such work, its dignity, its reward. The same book in chapters on MAKING AND BUILDING, BUYING AND SELLING, COMMUNICATION AND TRAVELING, SAVING AND CONSERVING, FINDING AND DOING ONE'S WORK, presents an inspiring array of occupations to be followed, of virtues to be attained, all in alluring form by a catholic assemblage of authors of all the ages.

All boys and girls would profit by such reading, but to this more indolent, more indifferent group, the group more likely to leave school early—unprepared for much of anything—this book should be a revelation of what work and industry may mean.

The A division will, of course, enjoy it, but again as in the seventh grade, they will read more extensively, ranging about to get the breadth and the possibilities of the field. More myths and ballads, *The Christmas Carol*, *The Sire de Malétroit's Door*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Lamb's

Tales from Shakespeare, Forbes's *Modern Verse*—these are types for them to distinguish and take pleasure in. The very abundance will mean that some they will reject, some "take to," but the boys, who, reading modern war verse, see that not all poetry is about flowers and love, are in a frame of mind at least to try another volume of it. Burroughs' *Birds and Bees* may bore to tears a town-bred youth, but it may be a gift of the gods to that not inconsiderable number of children who simply exist to spend another vacation "at grandfather's down in Maine." I have never found a class that did not like Lamb's *Tales* in themselves or as a background for reading and seeing the plays later. This group will read rapidly and omnivorously, suffering chance distastes for delight in the generosity of the feast.

In the next grade, the ninth, I should make three divisions, according to the course elected. The college course will have its requirements fairly definitely laid down; this year we are asked to teach in detail *Treasure Island*, *As You Like It*, and *The Lady of the Lake*. Occasionally such a college division may be tremendously handicapped by the inclusion within its numbers of a group from another course, the commercial or general, for instance. This may be disastrous to both, retarding the former, with a consequent slackening of interest, and discouraging the others, who resentfully see themselves outstripped by half the class. Theoretically all ninth-grade literature is the same; in practice it should not be. Pupils who have proved themselves to be college material—or at least resolved to work steadfastly toward the goal of a higher education—should be of "upper-half" calibre, capable of doing the requisite work with reasonable ease.

As before, they should continue the themes of the previous year, dwelling on beauty as exemplified in nature, in character, in idealism. If *Modern Verse* is familiar to them, there are many new pleasures in *Verse of Our Day*, an anthology of British and American poetry. Book III in the Lyman-Hill series is admirable for its presentation of social problems—neighborliness, co-operation, helping the handicapped, service, good citizenship, codes of conduct.

No American course in literature would be complete without the payment of homage to the American sense of humor.

Authors rather than titles make their own suggestions. Our youth are so constituted that from seventh grade to ninth they chuckle over *Tom Sawyer*, smile wisely at *New England Weather*, and laugh aloud over *The Ransom of Red Chief*. James Whitcomb Riley, Oliver Wendell Holmes, O. Henry, do not have to be explained to our boys and girls. In an unusual and charming little volume of supernatural verse, *The Haunted Hour*, compiled by Margaret Widdemer, there is a chapter on *Cheerful Spirits*. I cordially recommend *The Superstitious Ghost* by Arthur Guiterman, *Mary's Ghost* by Thomas Hood, *Cape Horn Gospel* by Masefield, and *The Ingolds by Penance* by Richard Harris Barham.

So to these older pupils we will give as richly as possible, showing them the wealth, the scope, the illimitable reaches of literature.

The second group will be made up of commercial, normal, preparatory, general course students. With them the two great aims will be to give a broad view of the subject, at the same time glorifying the idea of work. This is "the white-collar crowd," the office class-to-be, and probably no youth so direly need to learn the doctrines of hard work, of wholesome ambitions, of true bigness of spirit as they. Offer them the Lyman-Hill Book II or Book III—with its ringing message of democracy and brotherliness.

Last, with a peculiar appeal to me, comes that division variously styled "vocational," "manual training" and "domestic science." They are the more or less *hand-minded* types. Often they read slowly, indifferently, or not at all. Their tastes are simpler than those of their contemporaries in A and B; the boys want nothing but stories of sport and adventure; the girls dote on sugary love stories and moving-picture periodicals. And yet I have found them absolutely infantile in the ease with which they can be "steered" from one thing to another. *Treasure Island*, *The Gold Bug*, ballads, old and new, *The Ancient Mariner*, a civics reader of the simplest—they've "liked 'em all." I think it would be pure joy to have all three books of the Lyman-Hill set new to such a class, and in the course of a year to guide them through all three, luxuriating in the richness of our fortune.

Frankly, I should be rather slow about insisting they read poetry or anything else for sheer beauty or emotion. They're a shy crowd, these boys and girls, and can "let go" so much better over pluck, or cool nerve, or a grim sense of duty than over their own or anybody else's feelings about a skylark, or a sunset, or a daisy. Read to them sometimes bits of loveliness (which they may or may not enjoy) but do not make the mistake of expecting too much of them.

The satisfaction that lies in good work well done, the decency of self control, the quiet pleasure of friendliness, the self respect that comes from being a good sport—these are the lanterns to hang before such boys and girls to light them steadily on through literature to living.

II

Having made out such a course as this, or having been presented with one for use, we may regard it ruefully or with honest bewilderment of mind. How are we most effectively to use this material? It is rumored that there are schools where pupils may not read aloud, so far have we fared from that day when every word of *Treasure Island* was pronounced in class by somebody before that book was "read." Children need to read aloud. Often a baffling passage clears into sense by the mere saying of the words. How many of us have murmured a line of Browning until the meaning flashed radiantly to our mind! Children need to read aloud for beauty of sound and for rhythm as *produced by themselves*, be it ever so faulty; they should read aloud for feeling, as in poems like *Lord Ullin's Daughter* and *The Ancient Mariner*.

After all, as adults, we read for meaning, and this is our great task—or our royal privilege—to make it possible for children to read intelligently, understandingly, appreciatively. To this end the use of the paraphrase and the précis contribute. The former enriches the vocabulary, varies expression, and vivifies the text by making of it one's personal narrative. Tiresome if used to excess, it frequently clarifies the reader's misty ideas, illuminating the whole thought. A class that was literally toiling through *The Lady of the Lake*

made practical use of the paraphrase in translating many of the long, involved speeches. He who employs the *précis* must see clearly, think cleanly, and, concentrating on the marrow of page or paragraph, yield to his hearers its very essence.

Those who not so long ago received their training under teachers of the old school, were constrained to study English intensively and in minutest detail. *The Idylls* and the plays of Shakespeare were read and expounded line by line. Students paused not to visualize Mark Antony nor to arrange the Court Scene till they "saw" the relative positions of Shylock, Antonio, and Portia. If they, laboring in such unimaginative fashion, found a zest in studying literature, how much more human should our vitalizing methods present these men and women of books to the young people of to-day? For every biblical reference, every mythological allusion, the student of one short generation ago was held strictly accountable; archaic expressions must be turned into the purest of modern English as promptly as the phrase appeared. And yet though they did not concern themselves over the color of Nerissa's hair, they knew Nerissa as they did her mistress. No student could go through the weeks of study, hearing both speak, digging a possible weighty meaning from their gayest words, see their reactions to love, to sorrow, to imminent disaster, without developing a friendship for that sprightly pair.

Not for every one this method, though it for many will give the real heart and soul of book and play. Such searching analysis, such relentless insistence upon detail, have too frequently antagonized our young folk until they revolted. They changed their course; they left school. Ours be the wisdom to adjust our ways to the individuals before us. Let us rejoice, however, that in every school in the land there will always be a nucleus of those keen and ardent spirits who, delving into hidden mysteries, soaring to gleaming heights, will treasure always and forevermore the tenderness and the glory of literature.

From the great majority we make no such demands toward perfection. In a recent number of *The Boston Herald* Mr. Whiting writes:

All colleges and all schools give a portion of their time to teaching English. Courses and classes in literature and composition, in the analytical study of language, and all the detailed branches related, offer almost continuous opportunity for young men and women to take hold of the staff of literature and go journeying toward great things. Yet among all the devices and ways for agitating a love for and an understanding of English, there is none that will produce satisfactory results unless there is with them some spirit of enthusiasm, some element of worship.

How shall a school or college teach literature? What can a teacher or professor do to stir in the minds and hearts of young people a desire and a power to contribute fine things to the store of American writings? No subject is more difficult to teach. Every year throngs of young men and young women go through the educational mills, having contact with classes and teachers whose thought is the great literature of the world, whose efforts are in the way of composing in words great thoughts.

The power to write well cannot be specifically imparted. The great teacher knows this. To stir interest, to start enthusiasm, to point the way, to indicate the routes best to be followed, to teach discrimination, to cultivate taste, to warn against perils, to inculcate a love for good reading—that is the task of the teacher. The rest is with the pupil. Read, read, read!

Did I seem, a little way back, to speak slightly of the art of visualization, for it is no less than art? Years ago in reading *The Ring and the Book* with a true lover of Browning as our guide, some of us rebelled at his good humored insistence that we create for ourselves a living and breathing Pompilia, that we decide on her height, her weight, the color of her eyes, her habitual carriage. As with her, so with the other characters in that tragic drama. So conventional were we in our ways of reading that we were scandalized by such treatment. We felt it was lacking in delicacy, that men and women lost their poetic bloom by such handling. Needless to say, that not only in the subsequent reading did those figures move as suffering, sinning, heroic flesh and blood before our eyes, but that to-day they are as real and vivid, largely because of that enforced visualization.

With boys and girls there is no insistence upon this scheme required. Once they get the idea, they revel in its possibilities, especially where there is opportunity for a humorous depicting or a caricature. Begin with Tom Sawyer (has he freckles?), Rip Van Winkle, Jupe, and in time they will take pride in their own picture galleries of Robin Hood, Denis

de Beaulieu, Ellen, and Rosalind, and dozens of others. Following this same thought, we may "actualize" the setting, making maps or diagrams of the scenes of chapter or story. Sketch Plymouth village showing the bay, the hill, the fort, those scattered dwellings, so that when the wrathful Miles Standish plunges into the forest, we may know whether he strides east or west. Children love making the map of Treasure Island; planning the location of a cache is next best to finding one.

Sensory impressions is a comparatively new catchword in the teaching of literature, but for effectiveness it follows hard upon the merits of visualization. Did our Puritan ancestors leave us their inhibitions regarding the senses—that they were to be used when necessary and talked about not at all? that a wholehearted enjoyment of fragrance, or color, or melody was inevitably sinful? Let us give our children their birthright of the free and untrammelled use of these same senses—so that when they read *The Sandpiper*, they feel the hardpacked sand cool underfoot, they taste the salt of the windblown fog, they snuff the clean, sharp odor in their nostrils, they shiver a bit in the eastern gale. All these impressions will help to relieve the "non-reading" boys or girls of that firm conviction that books are soulless things far-removed from *their* experiences and *their* lives. We cannot expect everyone to respond with equal alacrity even to our so-skilful presentation. Shyness and an obstinate unwillingness to surrender to charm of any kind must be met and tactfully melted in a comfortable atmosphere of mutual enjoyment. The lack of imagination is oftentimes an intellectual shortsightedness that can be remedied by patience and a clever choice of selection.

These are all tricks of trade, as it were, devices to catch the ear and eye of the indifferent, to hold the straying attention of the hard-to-hold, to reveal unguessed interests to those suspicious of the printed pages. It is a game, an endless labor, an absorbing passion—anyone or all of them sometimes in the course of a single day—this teaching of junior high school literature.

III

Closely allied to the literature of the classroom comes outside reading with the many approaches, its boundless reaches. Shall we demand book reports? If so, shall they be formal and written, or oral and informal? How much freedom of choice shall we give boys and girls at this age? How shall we persuade the child who does not read? These are a few of the questions we all ask more or less anxiously.

If we can once convince these critical youngsters of our ability to recommend "a good book," they prove surprisingly tractable. Begin with something new that you know they will like—Frank Stockton's *The Christmas Truants* for a seventh grade; one chapter of *Dumbbell of Brookfield* by John Taintor Foote—or possibly *Le Linge of M'sieu*, that delicious story of Canadian camp life by Mary Raymond Shipman Andrews for an eighth; for those stolid, scornful ninth-grade boys just try that first chapter from Katherine Mayo's *The Standard Bearers*, that "thriller" which tells of the work of the Pennsylvania State Police. At the end of the period say casually, "Does anyone care for this before I return it?" or, "I got this upstairs in the Library and shall return it at the close of school. First come ——!" Then a few days later lure them on with one just as good. You will find that they will compare notes, so that that volume will be in demand for some time. We cannot expect them to leap straight from the simple but engaging tale of *Kak, the Copper Eskimo*, to *The Three Musketeers* or *Jeremy*, but it is our job to provide the intermediate books at the right time, in the right order.

Book reports as book reports I don't think much of; as a form of composition they are admirable. Writing or delivering a report has never added any glamor to a boy's reading of *Captains Courageous*. To the person who talks well and and likes to talk, the suggestion, "Tell the class, using the necessary background and setting, the story of the most hair-raising episode in *Dr. Jekyll and Mr. Hyde*," may be a pleasure as well as an inspiration to the class. Often, however, individuals may make appointments with their teacher to give, quite in private, their brief, personal opinions of

books read. There is, thus, a chance for a friendly bit of advice about the next book, discussion as to motive and ideals of the book in question, an invaluable point of contact over a common interest—we take it for granted that no teacher would profess himself *uninterested* at such a time.

The Hartford Reading Lists used in Hartford High School present generous and stimulating collections of fiction, biography, travel, poetry, and plays. These are intended for the four-year course of a senior high school, but almost all the material for the first two years can be used in the average junior high school. There is, too, a logical and sensible system of giving credits for books read.

It is a mighty subject, this one of what books our boys and girls shall read, when they shall be read, and how they shall be made most attractive. No one may ever settle these questions precisely. The heredity and environment and temperament of the teacher and the pupils enter in to complicate the matter. It is a situation where there must be free play for adaptability and growth, where understanding and sympathy are vital, where a sense of humor and a conscience are twin hand-maidens.

THE EDITOR'S JUNE JOTTINGS

This June number of the *Leaflet* will be tossed on many a cluttered desk and mingle forsooth among a perplexing maze of virgin examination papers, uncorrected themes, publishers' circulars, and scores of brilliant-hued time-tables that beckon homeward or to the unvisited faraways. It runs its admitted risk of lying unread until the desk is finally cleared, the riffraff of routine safely billeted, the suit-case packed, and the manicurings complete. And even so, there will be those who are more deeply and directly interested in escaping from schoolroom literature than in following Miss Allen's virile comments.

We shall not censure these fugitives for their lack of wisdom nor awake their senses to a severer judgment. We shall even assume in these perfectly normal types a more

pungent wit—a wit that allows them to create a train of thought of their own which sweeps them back to the early autumn of 1924 and compares the pedagogical prospect of a September morning with the retrospect of a June evening. And in this contrast all of us will thoughtfully join—some perhaps a little sadly, but with a summoned courage that stoically faces plain facts rather than ornate phantoms. Here are the facts.

Our pupils have made a slower progress than we in our autumn enthusiasm had fondly provisioned. We had expected to cover more ground in class; we had hoped to do more outside reading; we had imagined a greater deftness in rapid dictation and a quicker wit in original compositions; we had thought they could in their *précis* writing learn to acquire more easily the salient points of selected paragraphs.

They have not grown to be so intellectually thorough as we, in our September optimism, had thought they would. We had determined to develop in each student a thrift-instinct for the permanent acquisition of all those good new words that chance and a controlled environment would supply. The cross-word puzzle had seemed to fit into our plans for this and to offer its added diurnal stimulus. It has helped, of course, but less efficiently than our vain imaginings portrayed. Some of our plans for making every student eager to trace even the most elusive allusion have gone sadly agley; and too many of our boys and girls have acquired an agile skill in merely “tobogganing down the pages of literature.”

There are, of course, other deficiencies—many of them—that our retrospect reveals; but upon these we shall not too despondingly gaze. To loiter longer might set a-work many dangerous inhibitions—a sense of an acquired inferiority complex, a bipolar sentiment, and a thousand other psychological ills that the modern mind is heir to. Consummations devoutly to avoid! Let's set our thought movements to *allegretto* time.

The year has not been without real achievement. We have taught our students a little about the art of writing, a little about the art of interpretation. We have enlarged their conception of the drama; we have created a real respect for some

of the classics; we have won their allegiance to the cause of clear thinking; we have taught them to disown the merely tawdry titles at the modern book fair; we have enabled them to see real craftsmanship among contemporary authors. For all these achievements we take a reasonable pride.

But after all we are most gratified by the measurable growth in our pupils' respect for the traditions and niceties of the English language. Our group may not be guarding its heritage as sacredly as similar groups in France and in England would guard theirs; vulgarities and solecisms and drabness daily offend us. But a spirit of self-examination and of pride in accomplishment is apparent; an appeal to a finer taste has been made; and a richer vein has been discovered by our adventuring band of eager prospectors. All this is something—not much, perhaps, but something! If we can but maintain our vantage in this particular sector, we can surely advance the campaign when the troops remobilize in the autumn of 1925.

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THE MAGAZINE WORLD

FIRST ISSUE OCTOBER, 1925

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